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960th Soldiers pleased to be a part of hurricane relief effort

By Spc. Sarah E. Stannard
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Wyoming Army National Guard

BELLE CHASSE, La. – Sweat dripped into Pfc. Joshua A. Haffner's eyes, but he quickly wiped it away with the back of his gloved hand and returned to taking apart a fuel line on the humvee parked in his bay. With a little shake, the line came free, and caramel-colored fuel flowed into the containers below the vehicle.

"You know, one thing I've noticed about the military is that really it's a team thing," explained Haffner, as he tossed his wrench aside. "This is an Air Force humvee, but we work on it, because we're the mechanics for the whole area, not just Army folks."

Haffner, a mechanic, is one of 56 Soldiers from the Wyoming Army National Guard's 960th Maintenance Company, from Torrington, Wyo., who have been activated in support of Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.

As a general support maintenance company, the 960th is trained to provide any type of upkeep needed for Army vehicles. The unit can also provide direct support to units that do not have mechanics assigned.

“Direct support units do things like change oil,” said Haffner. “We do things like change engines. If you think about it, people out on the lines wouldn’t get too far without us behind them.”

Though the unit’s everyday function is to provide general support to other units, the 960th has also been charged with building and maintaining a vehicle parts warehouse at the Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base, Belle Chasse, La., said Capt. Terry Oedekoven, unit commander.

Warehousing is not a responsibility the unit is used to performing.

“We will be in charge of inventorying, keeping track of and supplying parts to the Army and Air National Guard units in the area that are helping the hurricane relief missions,” said Sgt. Vern R. Jones, a mechanic with the unit. “We actually don’t have a whole lot of experience with warehousing. But, you have to expect in the Army to be able to do all kinds of things associated with your job, not just the things you normally do. You have to adapt and overcome and get the mission done. If that’s what the Guard needs us to do here, we’re happy to do it,” Jones explained.

Mobilized on Sept. 29, the unit traveled from Torrington to Belle Chasse in a 20-vehicle convoy, stopping to sleep in National Guard armories along the way.

“We thought it might be bad for Soldier morale,” Jones said. “It’s a long hot drive across country in Army trucks, but we’re so happy to be able to help in some small way.”

Other Soldiers from the unit echoed the same sentiment.

“A lot of people might think that being mechanics we wouldn’t be helpful here,” said Spc. Stephen E. Walker, a fuel and electrical specialist. “And, we know it’s not going to get us on the front page of the newspaper, like the people doing searches and stuff. But, in some small way we’re helping deliver food, because sometimes those trucks wouldn’t run without us.”

As one jug filled, Haffner slid another under the humvee until the transparent liquid ceased to flow. He packaged his full containers neatly on a pallet and strapped them down tight.

"I think it's going to be kind of like an experiment, us running this warehouse. We're just glad to have a mission, and be here to help," said Haffner.

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Pictures are available by emailing trudy.woodcock@wy.ngb.army.mil